

Civil War Book Review

Spring 2016

Article 14

Massachusetts and the Civil War: The Commonwealth and National Disunion

Christopher Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Clark, Christopher (2016) "Massachusetts and the Civil War: The Commonwealth and National Disunion," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.2.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss2/14>

Review

Clark, Christopher

Spring 2016

Mason, Matthew and Viens, Katheryn P. and Wright, Conrad Edick.
Massachusetts and the Civil War: The Commonwealth and National Disunion.
University of Massachusetts Press, \$90.00 ISBN 9781625341501

The Commonwealth's Encounter with Disunion, War, and Emancipation

These distinguished papers, published in association with the Massachusetts Historical Society, were originally presented in 2013 at a conference to mark the Civil War sesquicentennial. Massachusetts was without doubt important to the struggle against slavery and the conduct of the Civil War. From William Lloyd Garrison and the black abolitionists who first supported the *Liberator*, to Senator Charles Sumner, the abolitionist wartime governor John Andrew, and the famous 54th Infantry Regiment, Massachusetts figures were in the front ranks of campaigners for freedom and Union. But Matthew Mason and his co-editors avoid the traps awaiting collections of this nature, which include exaggerating the Commonwealth's significance and trying to cover an unruly variety of themes. Instead they address three sets of topics that provide some unusual insights into the Commonwealth's encounter with war, disunion, and emancipation. In the process they help put Massachusetts abolitionism into a wider perspective.

Four opening essays address the dilemmas that abolitionists encountered. Even when they seemed to triumph they had to make compromises and alliances with those with whom they had disagreed. According to Dean Grodzins, the successive Boston Vigilance Committees of the 1840s and 1850s enabled activists of differing persuasions to cooperate in assisting fugitive slaves, but were prone to instability as they straddled the line between legal and extralegal action. John Stauffer traces how abolitionists were drawn to make common cause during the war with emancipationists whose first concern had been with preserving the Union. Peter Wirzbicki demonstrates how New England abolitionists long associated with disunionism applied their cultural capital to

embracing the Union and stamping it with their own regional sense of self-confidence; this was the moment from which, in their view at least, the nation came to seem an extension of New England. But Richard S. Newman discusses the questions that came to vex abolitionists, black and white, female and male, from the moment of their triumph at the war's end: at what point should they declare their struggle completed, and what would a post-abolition society look like?

A second group of essays features some of the abolitionists' more conservative adversaries, prominent and obscure. Matthew Mason discusses Edward Everett and the Constitutional Union Party. Carol Bundy describes how the Boston elite's reception of General George B. McClellan during a ten-day visit early in 1863 paradoxically accompanied their transition from supporting the Union to supporting emancipation. In a chapter entitled "The Bonds of Print," Ronald Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray draw quantitative material from a large project on the circulation and consumption of printed material to sketch the ways in which Massachusetts soldiers and their family members used and commented upon print culture in order to maintain connections severed by absence and dislocation. While remarking that the war helped diminish traditions of collective reading and made reading a more solitary habit, Zboray and Zboray conclude that "print enabled soldiers and civilians to endure a seemingly endless war" (214), serving up both fear and reassurance as men and women scoured letters and newspapers for intelligence of events and loved ones.

The volume concludes with discussions of Civil War memory and commemoration. Sarah Purcell juxtaposes the obsequies and tributes for Senator Charles Sumner on his death in 1874 with the outrage and formal censure Sumner had incurred just two years previously when he had sponsored a bill to prohibit army units from displaying honors from "battles with fellow-citizens" (227). Amy F. Morsman draws on the letters of Massachusetts teachers who went to work in the South before and after the end of the war to construct a composite picture of their efforts to promote understanding between the sections, but also to propound an emancipationist vision that envisaged former slaves realizing their full standing as citizens of the republic. Up to a certain point, therefore, reconciliation was not a priority. But Morsman notes in conclusion that the teachers found too many others, both South and North, willing to obstruct their inclusivist vision and to build reconciliation for whites only. This was in part, as Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai demonstrates in the book's final chapter, because members of the New England elite were tempering their views

of their Southern former enemies to fashion the terms of national reconciliation that have been so brilliantly delineated by David Blight's *Race and Reunion*. Tracing opinions in college students' letters from before the war, through secession, emancipation and Reconstruction, on to the turn of the century, Wongsrichanalai elaborates Blight's insight. He posits a Northern code of honor that compelled support for the Union and service in the war while secession lasted, but which in later decades permitted distinctions to be made between hard-core rebels whose guilt for secession could not be expiated and those "true gentlemen" whose own sense of honor had led them to take up arms for their states. So when Charles Francis Adams, Jr. asked a Phi Beta Kappa meeting in Chicago in 1902, "Was Robert E. Lee a Traitor?" the answer was no longer self-evident, indeed perhaps self-evidently negative.

Just as they had helped bring the Civil War about and just as they had contributed to the war effort, women and men of Massachusetts played their part in its aftermath, both in promoting attempts to complete a revolutionary change in American society, and in backing the moves that smoothed the "mighty scourge of war" by reconciling its white participants. The essays in *Massachusetts and the Civil War* help us see how this came about.

Christopher Clark, Professor of History and Head of the Department of History at the University of Connecticut is author of Social Change in America: From the Revolution through the Civil War (2006) and is at work on a book about land in American society and thought from the Revolution to the Cold War era.